

Message Text

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ACTION EUR-12

INFO OCT-02 ISO-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-05 H-01 INR-07
L-03 NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01 PRS-01 SP-02 SS-15
USIA-06 EA-10 BIB-01 EB-08 /078 W
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R 251717Z JAN 78
FM AMEMBASSY MOSCOW
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 7122
INFO AMEMBASSY BERLIN
AMEMBASSY BELGRADE
AMEMBASSY BONN
AMEMBASSY BUHAREST
AMEMBASSY BUDAPEST
AMEMBASSY LONDON
AMCONSUL MUNICH
AMEMBASSY PARIS
AMEMBASSY PRAGUE
AMEMBASSY SOFIA
AMEMBASSY WARSAW

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 2 MOSCOW 1212

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PINT, UR
SUBJECT: SOVIET LEADERSHIP: APPARENT CALM

REF: MOSCOW 458

SUMMARY: DESPITE SPORATIC RUMORS AMONG THE WESTERN
PRESS AND DIPLOMATIC CORPS THAT BREZHNEV HAS ALREADY
DIED OR IS GRAVELY ILL, THE INTERNAL POLITICAL SCENE
APPEARS TO BE CALM. LEADERSHIP ACTIVITIES SEEM
NORMAL: BREZHNEV CONTINUES TO RECEIVE HIS USUAL
RATION OF PERSONAL PRAISE; AND, AS ONE WOULD EXPECT,
KIRILENKO SEEMS TO BE HEADING THE PARTY APPARATUS
IN BREZHNEV'S ABSENCE AND RECEIVING SOMEWHAT MORE
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MEDIA ATTENTION THAN WHEN BREZHNEV IS AT THE HELM.
IT APPEARS IN RETROSPECT THAT BREZHNEV SUFFERED HIS
RELAPSE DURING THE PERIOD FROM JANUARY 7 TO JANUARY 9.
IF SO, THE TIMING OF THE BREZHNEV-SCHMIDT LETTER
POSTPONING BREZHNEV'S TRIP TO THE FRG SEEMS CURIOUS.
JUDGING FROM THE SOVIET MEDIA, MOST OTHER MOSCOW-BASED
POLITBURO MEMBERS HAVE BEEN RELATIVELY INACTIVE IN

THE PAST SEVERAL WEEKS. END SUMMARY.

1. BREZHNEV RUMORS. THE MOSCOW RUMOR MILL SWUNG INTO HIGH GEAR JANUARY 24 WITH THE STORY, ORIGINALLY SOURCED TO AN UNIDENTIFIED AUSTRIAN DIPLOMAT OR JOURNALIST, THAT A SOVIET DOCTOR REVEALED BREZHNEV HAD DIED AT 0530 HOURS THAT MORNING. SOME IN THE WESTERN PRESS CORPS HERE, ANXIOUS NOT TO MISS THE BIG STORY AND ALREADY PREPARED WITH UPDATED OBITUARIES OF LEONID IL'ICH, BEGAN CALLING DIPLOMATIC CONTACTS, WHO IN TURN COMMENCED CALLING THEIR DIPLOMATIC AND JOURNALISTIC CONTACTS. THIS PARTICULAR RUMOR COOLED DOWN A BIT WHEN THE SIX PM TELEVISION NEWS SHOWED KIRILENKO, KULAKOV GRISHIN, DOLGIKH, RYABOV AND OTHER PROMINENT SOVIETS ON THE DAIS--AS IF EVERYTHING WERE NORMAL (NONE WAS WEARING A BLACK TIE)--AT A JANUARY 24 KREMLIN MEETING OF SCIENTIFIC AND TECHNICAL SOCIETIES. THE AUSTRIAN EMBASSY TELLS US IT KNOWS NOTHING ABOUT THE RUMOR, AND ASSUMES IT STEMMED FROM A MISUNDERSTANDING OR GARBLE.

2. ANOTHER RUMOR, WHICH WE HEARD FROM A MEMBER OF THE MOROCCAN EMBASSY, HAS IT THAT SEVERAL ARAB MISSIONS UNDERSTAND FROM AN UNDISCLOSED SOURCE OR SOURCES THAT BREZHNEV WAS HOSPITALIZED BECAUSE OF THE RECCURANCE OF A HEART PROBLEM, PROBABLY NOT A HEART ATTACK.
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3. CHRONOLOGY OF BREZHNEV'S RELAPSE. FOLLOWING BREZHNEV'S TELEVISED APPEARANCE AT THE JANUARY 5 KREMLIN AWARD CEREMONY, HE APPARENTLY ATTENDED A CIRCUS PERFORMANCE SATURDAY EVENING, JANUARY 7. AS WE UNDERSTAND HAS BEEN REPORTED BY WESTERN NEWS MEDIA, FRG REPORTS HERE SAY THEY OBTAINED CONFIRMATION FROM THE ADMINISTRATION OF MOSCOW'S "OLD" CIRCUS ON TSVETNOY BUL'VAR THAT BREZHNEV ATTENDED THE FIRST HALF OF THE CIRCUS PROGRAM THE EVENING OF JANUARY 7. TO OUR KNOWLEDGE, THIS WAS HIS LAST PUBLIC ACTIVITY PRIOR TO HIS PRESUMED RELAPSE.

4. ON JANUARY 10, A JAPANESE OFFICIAL IN FOREIGN MINISTER SONODA'S PARTY (REFTEL) TOLD US SONODA'S JANUARY 9 ARRIVAL IN MOSCOW THAT BREZHNEV WOULD BE UNABLE TO RECEIVE HIM BECAUSE OF BREZHNEV'S POOR HEALTH. THUS, BREZHNEV'S RELAPSE APPARENTLY OCCURRED SOMETIME IN THE PERIOD FROM THE EVENING OF JANUARY 7 THROUGH JANUARY 9.

5. PUZZLE OF THE BREZHNEV-SCHMIDT LETTER. AT LEAST TWO EXPLANATIONS WOULD PLAUSIBLY ACCOUNT FOR THE TIMING OF THE JANUARY 17 LETTER FROM BREZHNEV TO SCHMIDT, POSTPONING THE BREZHNEV FRG VISIT BEYOND FEBRUARY 19:

--PERHAPS THE INITIAL PROGNOSIS OF BREZHNEV'S RELAPSE WAS UNCERTAIN, CAUSING A DELAY OF ABOUT ONE WEEK (FROM AROUND JANUARY 8 TO ABOUT THE 16TH) FROM THE RELAPSE TO THE PREPARATION OF THE LETTER; OR,

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--THE SOVIETS MAY CONCEIVABLY HAVE DECIDED TO USE THE BREZHNEV-SCHMIDT LETTER AS A DEVICE FOR SIGNALLING TO FOREIGN OBSERVERS (THE LETTER AND ITS DATES STILL HAVE NOT BEEN DISCLOSED BY THE SOVIET MEDIA) THAT BREZHNEV WOULD BE OUT OF CIRCULATION UNTIL LATE FEBRUARY FOR REASONS OF HEALTH.

--THE LATTER EXPLANATION WOULD GAIN CREDIBILITY IF THE FEBRUARY 16-19 VISIT DATES WERE FIRST PROPOSED TO BONN AFTER BREZHNEV'S RELAPSE, I.E. ON OR AFTER THE 9TH OR 10TH OF JANUARY. THE FRG EMBASSY HERE PROFESSES

NOT TO KNOW WHEN THE FEBRUARY DATES WERE FIRST PUT
FORWARD BY THE SOVIETS IN BONN, BUT ASSURES US THE
DATES WERE NEVER PROPOSED TO THE FRG EMBASSY HERE IN
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6. MEDIA TREATMENT OF BREZHNEV. BREZHNEV CONTINUES
TO RECEIVE PERSONAL PRAISE IN THE SOVIET MEDIA, AND
HIS NAME CONTINUES TO BE PRINTED AT THE BOTTOM OF
CONGRATULATORY LETTERS TO ECONOMIC COLLECTIVES, AS
IF HE WERE SIGNING THE LETTERS. HOWEVER, AS NOTED
BELOW, IN SOMETHING OF A DEPARTURE FROM PAST PRACTICE
BREZHNEV DIDNOT "SIGN" A JANUARY 24 CENTRAL COMMITTEE
MESSAGE TO A MOSCOW MEETING OF SCIENTIFIC AND TECHNICAL
SOCIETIES. IN PRESS AND TV COVERAGE OF CHANCELLOR
SCHMIDT'S RECENT SPEECH, SOVIET MEDIA REPLAY
SCHMIDT'S COMMENT THAT GREAT IMPORTANCE IS ATTACHED
TO BREZHNEV'S "FORTHCOMING VISIT." THIS COMMENT WAS
REPEATED, FOR EXAMPLE, ON SOVIET TV'S "INTERNATIONAL
REVIEW" PROGRAM JANUARY 22. THE OBVIOUS IMPLICATION
IS THAT BREZHNEV WILL MAKE THE TRIP IN THE NEAR FUTURE.

7. KIRILENKO. AMONG THE SENIOR POLITBURO MEMBERS
(KIRILENKO, KOSYGIN, SUSLOV), KIRILENKO SEEMS TO BE
THE MOST AUTHORITATIVE PARTY FIGURE IN BREZHNEV'S
ABSENCE. FOR EXAMPLE,

--AS IN 1976 AND 1977, IN JANUARY OF THIS YEAR
KIRILENKO ADDRESSED A CENTRAL COMMITTEE GATHERING OF
MEDIA OFFICIALS; IN A SMALL BUT PERHAPS SIGNIFICANT
DEPARTURE FROM LAST YEAR'S MEDIA COVERAGE OF THE EVENT,
"PRAVDA'S" JANUARY 19 WRITE-UP SHOWS KIRILENKO'S
NAME IN BOLD-FACED TYPE;

-KIRILENKO ALSO ADDRESSED A CENTRAL COMMITTEE
GATHERING OF TOP ECONOMIC FUNCTIONARIES ON JANUARY
12 AND "PRAVDA'S" JANUARY 13 ARTICLE ON THE MEETING
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ALSO PRINTS HIS NAME IN BOLD TYPE;

-KIRILENKO READ GREETINGS FROM THE CPSU CENTRAL
COMMITTEE TO A JANUARY 24 KREMLIN MEETING OF SCIENTIFICA
AND TECHNICAL SOCIETIES, AND THE SUBSEQUENT "PRAVDA"
ACCOUNT RENDERS HIS NAME IN BOLD TYPE IN THIS CONNECTION;

THE JANUARY 24 TV NEWS PROGRAM "VREMYA" DEVOTED ALMOST SIX MINUTES TO FILM AND VOICE OF KIRILENKO READING THIS MESSAGE (HE APPEARED TO BE FIT AND FULL OF ENERGY); IT IS WORTH NOTING, AS A POSSIBLE STRAW IN THE WIND, THAT SUCH MESSAGES USUALLY ARE "SIGNED" BY BREZHNEV (AS, FOR INSTANCE, IN THE CASE OF THE DECEMBER 20 BREZHNEV GREETINGS TO ORGANS OF STATE SECURITY), WHILE THIS ONE WAS FROM THE CENTRAL COMMITTEE AS A WHOLE.

8. ACTIVITIES OF OTHER SOVIET LEADERS. WE SEE NOTHING PARTICULARLY NOTEWORTHY IN THE CURRENT ACTIVITIES OF OTHER MOSCOW-BASED POLITBURO MEMBERS. KOSYGIN OBVIOUSLY HAS FILLED IN FOR BREZHNEV ON RECENT HIGH-LEVEL GOVERNMENTAL VISITS TO MOSCOW, SUCH AS THAT OF THE JAPANESE FOREIGN MINISTER AND ALGERIAN PRESIDENT BOUMEDIENE. SUSLOV SEEMS TO BE ON A RELATIVELY LIGHT SCHEDULE. THE RECORD FOR MOST PUBLIC APPEARANCES THUS FAR IN JANUARY GOES TO THE DURABLE V.V. KUZNETSOV, WHO SEEMS CONTINUOUSLY BUSY MEETING, GREETING, AND PRESENTING AWARDS.
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Message Attributes

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